

August 10, 2025

Rev. Mike Eller

“Faith as a Way of Seeing”

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

This morning, we are in the hall of faith, Hebrews chapter 11. What do we talk about when we talk about being a person of faith? This chapter is helpful because it begins with probably the most well-known definition of faith we are given in the Bible: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Other translations say: “...the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen”, or “*being confident* of what we hope for, *convinced about* things we do not see.” From this, we learn that faith concerns the *practice of participating* in the unseen.

For some, it is a practice in futility. Meaning, why think about what we can’t see, at all? After all, isn’t there enough to deal with in what *is* seen?

The chapter continues: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen *was made from* things that are not visible.” So faith, too, concerns itself with the business of world-making.

Long before DisneyWorld in Florida was ever completed, Walt Disney died. He never saw his expansive vision come to fruition. One of the people on his development team, Mike Vance, recalls a time soon after the parks were completed, when someone commented: “It’s too bad Walt Disney didn’t live long enough to see this?” Vance replied, “He did see it—that’s why it’s here!”

If you were to have visited that swampy plot of land in Florida before the parks were built, you would have witnessed miles of emptiness. And while the rest saw a swampy wasteland, Walt Disney was picturing boats and trains, children and adults walking up and down magical streets as they visit Frontierland, Adventureland, and Tomorrowland.

We’ve taken our girls to DisneyWorld a couple of times in recent years, it’s a very real place. Yet there was a time when it only existed in the imagination of one person. I love how the creative force behind the design and

development of the parks is called WDI—Walt Disney Imagineering. To see what they have created together, no one would dare call to question the power of imagination.

Let's take a moment to appreciate the wonder and gift of our imagination. One brain scientist says, "Imagination is the brain's capacity to simulate, combining past experiences and future possibilities into new, hypothetical 'realities.' " Who needs AI, right?! We are wonderfully-built, world-making machines, who stand in the gap between what was and all-we-desire-there-to-be and we construct that new world in our imagination. Neuroscientists call this our *default mode network* (DMN). Like a box of mental crayons, the brain uses "what was" to imagine and sketch out "what might be", blending the two together. They have found that the *default mode network* is extremely active during daydreaming and mind wandering.

How often do we caution our children who don't seem to be paying attention like that police officer in the movie *Wonka* who fines young Willy Wonka for daydreaming. Wonka wasn't just "checking out", he was creating a new world.

To quote perhaps the greatest mind to have ever lived, Albert Einstein: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand."

One thing you are probably learning about me: I geek out about science. One of the reasons I love science is because with my faith I dream of the world I long to be, and with science I learn how that which is unseen is continuously being realized in the world we know.

For instance, I dream of a world where no one is isolated and that we would all feel connected to one another. Therefore, community-building is an integral practice to my Christian faith. Then in science, I learn about the theory of Quantum Entanglement, which says that divisions between what we see as being separated matter is a fallacy. That at the smallest atomic level, all matter is entangled in a beautiful, unseen web of connection. The space between things is only perceived as such because of the limitations of human sight. Scientists even recently are uncovering a theory that particles separated at opposite ends of the galaxy share an invisible link so strong that a change to one affects the other, despite their vast distance. I find this to be

deeply spiritual. This is evidence of things not seen. And I'm learning to NOT be a person who lives only by sight.

I'm naturally an empathetic person. It is part of my Christian faith that we should be able to step into the shoes of another and seek to understand each other beyond surface-level relationships. Science confirms that when singing together heart rates and other biological rhythms sync up between those doing this shared practice. So that when we are here in this room, going through the rituals of our faith, we are becoming one body in ways beyond what the eye can see. And I'm learning to NOT be a person who lives only by sight. In the words of Jewish Rabbi, Harold Kushner: "Religion is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers, or a series of rituals. Religion is first and foremost a way of seeing."

Somewhere along the way, we've sterilized faith into being mere belief about the unbelievable. Something along the way has been lost. Faith in antiquity was radical. When one said they're a person of faith, that meant a powerful force to be reckoned with. So much so that thousands of years later, we are still consumed, even transformed, by the faith stories they told of another kingdom. An imaginative faith would have struck fear in the heart of empires.

The late theologian, Walter Brueggemann—who just passed away recently—said: "...every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. [We must] keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one." Now, you may not consider yourself an artist in any shape or form, but I want to suggest to you that being a person of faith means you are someone who creates new worlds. I think Brueggemann, here, is using the vocation of an artist more generally.

Not all lost this power of imaginative faith. I think of Harriet Tubman—the "Moses of her people"—who imagined a life beyond what she saw long before the underground railroad gave refuge and freedom to so many slaves. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King, who didn't just dream a make-believe world, but inspired the imagination of a country that has since been working to bring his visions of equality and dignity to fruition. A beautiful picture of a small, mustard seed-like faith working its way through the dough. Today, so many leaders on the front lines fighting for LGBT rights...these are the prophets striving to pull the unseen vision of justice into our reality.

This is why it's so important to listen to the voices of those on the margins. Because of their position in society, they are forced to (maybe even freed to) reimagine the world differently. And we—especially those who are in privileged positions—need to hear their stories and strain to see the imaginative worlds they are trying to build, if we want a fuller construction of justice and love in the here and now.

When Jesus asked us to pray, "God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven," he was inviting us to participate in this exercise of imagination. "Think about what heaven would be like. Now, go and make it happen now. Faith is a verb. Somehow we've made it a passive label. As Christians, we should be faith-ing our world.

It can be hard to know what an imaginative faith looks like. So, think, instead of what an unimaginative faith would be. Let your mind wander for a moment on what it would be to have an unimaginative faith. We might determine that that's really no faith at all.

Presbyterian minister, scholar, theologian, Eugene Peterson—who authored *The Message* translation of the Bible—said: "In our culture right now, the imagination is maybe the least developed faculty in adults. We let other people do our imagining for us, and as a culture, we take the lowest denominator of imagination." In the book of Matthew, it says: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Often we interpret this to mean that a childlike faith is merely accepting religious doctrine without questions or doubt. Maybe what is meant here is a return to the imagination—That even the kingdom of heaven becomes inaccessible without this practice of participation in the unseen.

To close, a sermon on imagination cannot end without doing some imaginative work. So here are some questions to stimulate our thinking:

What would a non-hierarchical, cooperative, just world look like?

Is that a world you are prepared to or want to live in? What comforts you about that world? What would make you afraid of that world?

How attached are you to this current imagination of society?

What kinds of life-practices would need to be developed in order to be connected to that kind of world in a meaningful way?

What would you need to unlearn, grieve, boycott or withdraw yourself from in order to get closer to it? What or who would you need to grow closer to, engage or be around in order to get closer to that vision?

Where or who is ALREADY articulating and living out this new vision?

To sum up this morning's thoughts: What science and religion both agree on is that there is a reality beyond what our eyes can see. Faith-ing our world used to be a radical exercise of calling into being that which was unseen. As people of faith, we need to reclaim this radical calling. It is with an imaginative faith that will live with the conviction of things unseen. May it be so for us.